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Pamphlet No. 79

The Novel and the Fairy Tale

By

JOHN BUCHAN

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THE NOVEL AND THE FAIRY TALE[1]

I

I PROPOSE this afternoon to amuse myself—and, I hope, to interest you—with something which rarely comes my way—an informal gossip about literature. It is now a good many years since I first became interested in books. But all my life I have also been interested, professionally interested, in other things, so that I have no title to speak on literature as a man of letters for whom the written word has been the working instrument of his career. The result of this imperfect absorption in the subject has been to make my views on many literary subjects highly unorthodox. I do not seem to have the right standard of values—at least I have not quite the same standard as the authoritative critics.

For example, I am of opinion that *Middlemarch* is one of the half-dozen greatest novels ever written, but I do not find many people to-day who have a good word for George Eliot. Again, I think that the best modern English prose has not been written by professed stylists, but by people like Huxley and Newman, whose one aim was to say clearly what they had to say and to have done with it—a creed which would be regarded, I fear, as a sort of blackleg ging by most men of letters. Again, I think that, among English poets since Keats, probably a larger proportion of Matthew Arnold's work will endure than that of any other; but I fancy that there are not many who share that opinion.

But my chief heterodoxy—heterodox, I mean, as regards the professional critics, not as regards the ordinary reader, who, I suspect, often shares these views—my chief heterodoxy has to do with the English novel. It has always been my secret view that the English novelists of the eighteenth century were a little over-praised—even Defoe and Fielding. But I think that the nineteenth-century novel in England is one of the main achievements in our literature, comparable with the Elizabethan drama. I should rank without hesitation Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens among the greatest of the world's novelists, and I should class at least two novels of Thackeray, one of George Eliot's, and three of Thomas Hardy's, among the world's greatest works of fiction.

I apologize for these egotistical confessions, but they have brought us to our starting-point—the Victorian novel. It is hard to say what is the special gift of our people in literature. Sometimes I think it is for a kind of lyric; sometimes I think it lies in the writing of history; but on the whole I believe it is for fiction. The Victorian

[1] Presidential address delivered to the Scottish Branch, Nov. 22, 1930.

novel is the most typical product of our national genius. Now that, I fear, is an unfashionable opinion. The novel, we are told to-day, has progressed far beyond such jejune methods. To-day it is weighted with a psychological profundity of which the Victorian innocents never dreamed. They, poor souls, believed that black was black and white was white; we now know that there are no clean colours, but that everything is a muddy yellow. They thought it their business to tell a story, but to tell a story is to shape existence into an arbitrary pattern for which there is no warrant. The true artistry of the novel, we are told, should be a thing of infinite delicacy and precision, which can catch and register the faintest whispers of the sub-conscious. It should take the whole complex of life for its province, neglecting nothing as common or unclean, and finding its unity not in any pattern super-imposed, but in what the subject matter itself presents, if viewed with complete detachment and sincerity.

Now, I am not going to argue against that doctrine, but I would suggest that for the sake of clearness we should get a new name for the work which it has inspired. These contemporary palimpsests of sensations and emotions and passions may have their scientific value, they have undoubtedly their literary value, but obviously they belong to an entirely different class from the books which we have been accustomed to call novels. There is no common denominator which enables us to compare *David Copperfield* with the fiction of certain modern French, English, American, and German writers. Let us confine the word novel, for our present purposes, to the kind of book which the great Victorians produced, and disregard the question as to whether it is inferior as a literary kind to that which is produced by the new iconoclasts. It is enough for us that it is different. A novel, in the sense in which I use the word, is *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Our Mutual Friend* and *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

II

There is a passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* which I think puts very well the general purpose of this kind of novel. He is speaking of Wordsworth's poetry, and his words apply to any great work of art, and especially, it seems to me, to prose fiction as the Victorians conceived it. Its purpose, he says, is:

> 'To give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasury, but one for which, in con-

sequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes that see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.'

From that sentence of Coleridge it would be easy to develop a whole philosophy of the art of fiction. Fiction deals with ordinary life; but, without ever losing touch with the ground, it must somehow lift it into the skies. It must give it for us an air of novelty and strangeness and wonder, by showing beauty in unlikely places, courage where one would not have looked for it, the jewel in the pig's snout, the flower on the dunghill. A poet like Milton or Dante brings cosmic sublimities within hail of our common life; a great novelist makes our common life itself cosmic and sublime.

But we must go farther than the general purpose. If it is to be attained, certain rules must be observed. Take first the method by which life is to be presented. Certain modern critics of the Victorian novel complain of its lack of realism. It sentimentalizes life for us, they say, and fails to tell the whole truth about it. Life, we are told, should be allowed to speak for itself, and not be selected and winnowed by the arbitrary will of the novelist. The novelist should be merely the medium through which the real world speaks in all its crudeness and confusion. Well, I would remark that on that principle you will get an inventory, not a work of art. The business of art is to present life, the real point of life, and for that selection is necessary, since a great deal of life is off the point. It must clear away the surplusage of the irrelevant, the inessential, the inorganic. It must provide the only true kind of picture, which is an interpretation.

The real objection of these critics is, I think, that the Victorians were not ugly enough. They did not believe that the pathological was the most important thing in the world, and that the most characteristic thing about a house was the adjacent dust-heap. They were too deeply interested in humanity to be obsessed by that side which humanity shares with the brute creation. They were too interested in the human soul to give all their time to its perversities and vagaries. They had a cleaner palate and a robuster philosophy than their critics, and if they are blamed on this score, then they must share the blame with all the greatest literature of the world since Homer.

Again, they were not clever people, like those who decry them, and in this they were akin to the ordinary man, who is nearly as suspicious of mere cleverness as Mr. Baldwin. The trouble about cleverness is that it is so rarely greatness. The clever person is much more interested in himself than in anything else, and in whatever he does he is always looking at his own face in the mirror. It is a

curious fact that since the War, which meant for all the world such a noble renunciation of self, most of our poetry and fiction should be so egocentric. The writers are perpetually wrestling with their own moods and tinkering with their own emotions, and they rarely rise to the self-forgetfulness of the greater art. The Victorian novelist was sublimely unconscious. He was absorbed with life and lived fiercely in his characters. He was not a showman exhibiting a set of puppets, boring his audience by telling it constantly what he felt about it all.

Now it is a futile business to compare incomparables, and the work of many of our recent novelists, who are in strong revolt against the great Victorian novels, is not comparable with them. It is based on a different theory of art, on a different conception of the novel. Brilliant and valuable as much of their work is, I do not think that they succeed in what I regard as the central and dominant type of fiction, of which the Victorians have given us the greatest examples in our own or in any language.

III

But I want to invite you to-night to a different and, I think, more fruitful kind of inquiry; and all I ask of you is that you fling your mind back to the literature of your childhood. (We have always had story-tellers and makers of fiction since the days of the cave-man. There is an eternal impulse in human nature to enliven the actual working life by the invention of tales of another kind of life, recognizable by its likeness to ordinary life, but so arranged that things happen more dramatically and pleasingly—which indeed is the familiar world in a glorified and idealized form.

That is the origin of what we call the folk tale or the fairy tale—we need not for our present purpose make any distinction between them. These tales come out of the most distant deeps of human experience and human fancy. They belong to the people themselves, not to a specially gifted or privileged class, and they are full of traces of their homely origin. They deal with simple and enduring things, birth and marriage and death, hunger and thirst, natural sorrows and natural joys. They sprang from a society where life was hard, when a man was never quite certain of his next meal, when he never knew when he arose in the morning whether he would be alive in the evening, when adventure was not the exception in life, but the rule. It was a dangerous world and a cruel world, and therefore those who dwelt in it endeavoured in their tales to escape from it. They pictured weakness winning against might, gentleness and courtesy against brutality, brains as against mere animal strength, the one chance in a hundred succeeding.

Such things do sometimes happen, and the society where the folk tales were born clung fiercely to this possibility, because on it depended their hope of a better time. Like Malvolio, they 'thought nobly of the soul'. The true hero in all the folk tales and fairy tales is not the younger son, or the younger daughter, or the stolen princess, or the ugly duckling, but the soul of man. It was a world where a great deal of discomfort and sorrow had to be borne, and where the most useful virtue was the passive virtue of fortitude; but in the folk tales it is not this passive virtue that is exalted, but daring, boldness, originality, brains—because the people who made them realized that the hope of humanity lay not in passivity but in action.

The appeal of such stories has not been lessened by time. In one form or other they have delighted youth for a thousand years and more. Poets and artists have borrowed from them and made elaborate artistic creations out of their simplicities. Their appeal is to every class and age; indeed they form a kind of *corpus* of popular philosophy. But the particular point I want to make is this: in a sophisticated society something more is wanted than the simple folk tale, and that something is the novel. My argument is that only in so far as the novel is a development of and akin to the folk and fairy tale does it fully succeed, and that it is in this kinship that the virtue of the great Victorian novels especially lies.

I observe about these novels that in the first place they tell a good story—something which grips and enthrals the reader, with true drama and wonder in it. In the second place they are full of characters recognizable as real types, and they pass judgements on these characters; that is, the story-teller regards some as definitely good and some as definitely bad. In the third place, their method of reproducing reality is not that of an inventory of details, but of a judicious selection. In the fourth place, the story-teller is primarily interested in the events he has to tell of, and not in what the jargon of to-day calls his 'reactions' to them. He does not stop to obtrude his own moods. Lastly, he has a dominant purpose, a lesson, if you like, to teach, a creed to suggest, the nature of which we shall consider later.

Now all these things the great Victorians had. Most of these things their critics lack. All these things the folk tales possess. Let us look a little farther into them.

IV

First for the story. I believe that there are only a very limited number of good plots in the world, though you have endless variations of them. That was more or less the idea of the Greek

dramatists; it seems to have been more or less the idea of Shakespeare; and it is more or less the idea of the great novelists. It is curious, if you consider the classic novels, how limited is the number of motives. Moreover, I think you will find them all already in the folk tales. Let us make a short list of them.

There is first of all what we may call the picaresque motive, the story based on extension in space, on the fact that the world is very wide, and that there are a great many odd things in it. A young man sets out to seek his fortune; an ill-treated child runs away from its stepmother; a pretty girl is driven into the forest. There are endless variations on the subject. The hero may be the pure adventurer in the void, waiting to see what turns up; or he may have a serious quest to find something or somebody that is lost, to unravel a mystery, to marry a lady the fame of whose beauty has reached him. And the thing may be done seriously or in a spirit of comedy. It may stick close to earth or adventure into the clouds. The road may be a pleasant and bustling highway running past windmills and gardens and farms and little towns, or a mysterious path through enchanted forests. The one thing common to them all is the conviction that the world is full of surprising things and that anything may happen to the adventurer.

Open Grimm, or Perrault, or any of the great folk tale collections, and you will find a multitude of examples in this class. 'Little Brother and Little Sister', 'Hop o' my Thumb', 'The Little Tailor', 'The Two Brothers', 'Puss in Boots', 'The Sleeping Beauty' are a few of the most familiar. In fiction we have *Don Quixote* and *Gil Blas*; we have *Tom Jones* and *The Cloister and the Hearth*. When D'Artagnan rides to the sea he is doing what the people in folk tales did. So is Mr. Polly when he sets out on his travels, and so is Mr. Pickwick when he mounts the Rochester coach.

Next there is the motive which Aristotle said was one of the chief things in drama, and which he called *Peripeteia*, or Reversal of Fortune. It is the commonest subject of the folk tales. We can picture the peasant in the Middle Ages, groaning under the exactions of kings and nobles and churchmen and accustomed to see proud cavalcades drive him off the road into the ditch, consoling himself with tales which told how the mighty were brought low, and grace was given to the humble. And we can imagine the peasant's son, full of young ambitions which he sees no way to attain, being cheered by the tales of swineherds who became kings, and goose-girls who became princesses, and the plain fighting man who married the Sophy of Egypt's daughter. It is a very old motive and a very modern one. You will find it in the Bible, in the stories of Ruth and Saul and David, and of Nebuchad-

nezzar the King; you can find it in the latest trashy feuilleton, in which the beautiful kitchen-maid becomes a duchess. Very closely connected with it is another theme which Aristotle made the second staple of tragedy, and which he called *Anagnorisis* or Recognition. That is, so to speak, the proper climax of Reversal of Fortune, and you find it alike in the greatest and crudest of tales. Its crude form is the child changed at nurse, the missing heir with the strawberry mark on his arm, and all the business which concludes with 'You are my long lost brother!' The mere fact that you find it in the most elementary literature which possesses any popular appeal seems to suggest that it is rooted in something very deep in human nature. The reason is obvious. It is the most dramatic form of happy ending. One look is given, one word is spoken, and the prince who has been a swine-herd is a prince again, while the usurper is cast out upon the world.

The folk tales based on Reversal of Fortune are among the best. At the top I should put one which is not a folk tale at all, but the invention of a modern writer, Hans Andersen's 'Ugly Duckling'. It is modern, but it is in the true folk tradition. Among the old stories I would cite 'The Hut in the Forest', 'The Goose Girl', and 'Cinderella'. If you want parallels from the great Victorians I would suggest *Guy Mannering* and *The Antiquary*, and *Ivanhoe* from the beginning of the era, and Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from the close. Mr. Hardy is always very near the soil and the traditions of the soil, and the ascent of Donald Farfrae and the descent of Michael Henchard are in the true folk spirit.

The third theme is what I venture to call the Survival of the Unfittest, the victory against odds of the unlikeliest people. That is based upon the incurable optimism of human nature. The men who made the folk tales had no notion how it happened, so they were forced to bring in enchantments of all sorts to make it possible—fairy godmothers, benevolent old women, magic rings and swords and shoes and cloaks. But they had an unshakable conviction that it would happen and that it could happen, and they believed in happily fated people who had more luck than others, more courage, and more dexterity, who were somehow blessed by the gods, and were able to perform feats impossible for others. The popularity of certain film stars is a proof that human nature has not outgrown this belief.

The theme takes various forms. There is courage against impossible odds, as in the stories of the conquests of dragons and giants. 'Jack the Giant-Killer' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk' are familiar examples. Dumas is full of the same story, as in the deeds of D'Artagnan and the Three Musketeers, and the death of

Bussy d'Amboise. Again, there is escape against all reasonable odds, as in 'Blue Beard' and 'Snowdrop' and 'Rumpelstiltskin' and 'Hansel and Gretel'. Enchantments are unhappily denied to the modern novelist; he is not allowed to bring in fairies to help him out; but you will find the same situation when Dugald Dalgetty escapes from the dungeon at Inverary, and young Waverley is delivered from the hands of the Gifted Gilfillan by the Highlanders, and in Jeanie Deans's journey to London to see the King. The scale must be weighted against the hero in the folk tale; he must be the youngest son with no patrimony, the poor boy with no friends. His task must be made as difficult as possible, for how otherwise can we get the full drama—how otherwise can ordinary folk be persuaded that life has colour in it and a wide horizon?

One of the commonest varieties of this type is the story of the uncouth lover who at first sight has nothing to recommend him. You get it in 'Bear-Skin', you get it in 'The Frog Prince', in 'Snow White and Rose Red', and in 'Beauty and the Beast'. The handsome swashbuckling gallant is all very well, but the folk mind did not think too highly of him. It suspected the obviously heroic and preferred to look deeper for quality. In this respect the folk tale has been followed in some of the greatest Victorian novels. What is the plot of *Vanity Fair*? It is the contest of two suitors for the hand of a very tiresome young woman—the dashing George Osborne and the cumbrous Dobbin, and the book is a record of the struggle of the homely worth of Dobbin against the glamour of his rival both in life and death, until at long last it is duly rewarded. In George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* it is Tom Redworth who wins the glittering lady, not Percy Dacier; and in Mr. Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* Shepherd Oak, after many ups and downs, eventually is the accepted lover of Bathsheba Everdene. Truly the folk tale has august descendants.

V

So much for the plot and the theme of the story. The next thing to be noted about the great Victorian novelists is their handling of character. Now, in the folk tale there is never any mistake about the people. The characters are human beings, and represent humanity in its central region, and not in its remote suburbs. The old story-teller was not interested in freaks. He understood a great villain and a great hero, but above all things he understood ordinary men, and he makes them reveal their character in their deeds, and does not make any pother about describing it. 'If you cannot get hold of my people', he seems to say to the reader, 'by seeing the kind of thing they do, then you are past praying for.'

Now this seems to me to be the very essence of good fiction. I have read novels by able men and women in which the characters could not get started to do anything because of the meshes of analytic psychology with which their feet were clogged. Pages of torturous analysis had to be waded through before the hero could kiss his wife or eat his breakfast. The trick of dissecting a character before a reader's eyes seems to me abominably bad craftsmanship. The business of the novelist is to make men and women reveal themselves in speech and action, to play the showman as little as possible, to present the finished product, and not to print the jottings of his laboratory.

Another point. The makers of the folk tales were not afraid to pass judgement upon their characters. A man was brave or he was not; he was kind or he was cruel; he was foolish or he was wise. There is a school of fiction to-day which objects to passing moral judgements on anything or anybody. It derives principally from a really great man, the Russian Dostoievsky, and people have praised his divine humanity which finds surpassing virtues in the worst of rogues. Now, I have nothing to say against this impartiality, though I think it may as easily have its roots in moral apathy and intellectual slovenliness as in divine wisdom. Philosophically, it may have its justification, but I suggest that since fallible men must have their standards and stick to them, such detachment is rather for their Maker than for themselves. In any case it is no virtue in a novelist who can only get drama by strong contrasts. The moral molluscs of certain fiction of to-day, who spend their time, if I may borrow a phrase of the late D. H. Lawrence, in sinning their way to sanctity, would have puzzled the makers of folk tales, as they puzzle any ordinary man. The great Victorian novelists have the same clearness of moral outline. They realize that all of us are a compost of good and bad, but that the orientation of certain men and women is as clearly towards evil as that of others is towards good, and they do not scruple to say so.

One last word on the question of character. The folk tale is not afraid of greatness. It believes that humanity is not a drab collection of mediocrities, but that nearly everybody has some poetry in him, and that it can flower at times into something which leaves the earth altogether and strikes the stars. Because it believed in human nature it believed that human nature could transcend itself and become god-like. Its heroes are so full of vitality that no giant or dragon or wicked stepmother manages to hamper them in the long run. They go their appointed course with a divine carelessness. They are immortal until they have fulfilled their purpose.

Such a creed springs from optimism about human nature, and I do not think that any great imaginative writer has been without it. (The power of creating a figure which, while completely human, seems to soar beyond humanity, is the most certain proof of genius. In such cases the creator seems to be dominated by his creation. It takes charge of him and has an independent life of its own over which he has no control)

There are two characters which seem to me to have taken charge of Shakespeare—Cleopatra and Falstaff. Whenever Cleopatra appears she dominates the scene, and the author is only a curtain-raiser in the wings. She and Antony both die, but speaking for myself, while I believe in Antony's death, I do not believe in Cleopatra's. As for Falstaff, it is a platitude to say that he got completely out of Shakespeare's control. The time came in the beginning of *Henry V*, when Shakespeare wished to dismiss him to make room for his reformed hero, and in order to wean the reader's affections from him it was necessary to degrade him. But Falstaff obstinately refuses to go, and all Shakespeare's art cannot degrade him. As Professor Bradley says, 'Shakespeare created so extraordinary a being and fixed him so firmly on his intellectual throne that when he sought to dethrone him, he could not. A moment comes when we are to look at Falstaff in a serious light, and the comic hero is to figure as a baffled schemer, but we cannot make the required change either in our attitude or our sympathies. We wish Henry a glorious reign and much joy of his hypocritical politicians, lay and clerical; but our hearts go with Falstaff to the Fleet, or if necessary to Arthur's bosom, or wheresomever he is.'

Let me offer you one or two other instances. There is Becky Sharp. Becky is too much for Thackeray. She is a little green-eyed, false, cold-hearted wretch, but vitality has nothing to do with morals. She keeps the stage to the end of the book and holds our sympathies even when she is deservedly punished; while Amelia Sedley, though her creator may sentimentalize as much as he pleases about her sweetness, remains a doll stuffed with sawdust.

Take Andrew Fairservice in *Rob Roy*. No sooner had Scott created him than he obviously began to dislike him, and he depicts him in all kinds of meannesses and cruelties. But our interest in the worthless Andrew does not ebb. He has only to appear on the stage and he blankets everybody else, even Bailie Nicol Jarvie and Rob Roy himself. Or take Trollope's Mrs. Proudie. You remember that in the *Last Chronicle of Barset* she suddenly dies. A friend once told me that he remembered the publication of the novel. One man would go up to another in the club and say, 'They tell me that Mrs. Proudie is dead. I don't believe a word of it.'

So, too, with two at least of Dickens's characters, Mr. Pickwick and Sairey Gamp. Mr. Pickwick, as Mr. Chesterton has pointed out, is simply the fairy prince, unconquerable, immortal, stumbling into troubles only to soar above them. Happily Dickens never tried to kill Mr. Pickwick, for he would have found it impossible. We could have believed in most things which he chose to tell us, but never in Mr. Pickwick's death. But a greater instance is Sairey Gamp. Actually she is a dreadful being, drunken, fraudulent, avaricious; but she is clearly immortal. Her quarrel with Betsey Prig is the only scene in literature which ranks beside the scenes into which Shakespeare introduces Falstaff. Imagine how the ordinary conscientious realist of to-day would have managed Sairey. He would have made her squalid and revolting: he would have blinked no sordid detail of her life; he would have turned her poor old rag-bag of a mind inside out; and all the while she would have been as dead as Queen Anne. As it is, nothing can kill her. She goes her wheezy, alcoholic way, a certain immortal. We are not told what became of her, and we do not need to be told, for she is as assured of continuance as the Solar System.

VI

I will pass lightly over the other two characteristics of the great Victorian novels which I have cited, and in each of which they show their kinship with the folk tale. Both represent a world in which the selective power of art has been at work. The Victorian novel is often prolix but it is never confused. The main lines of development are always crystal clear. Scott, for example, is fond of pouring the contents of an antiquarian's memory into his pages, but when things begin to happen there is no prolixity. He selects infallibly the details which print a great scene eternally on the memory. So, too, with the folk tales. They never fumble. The right details are unerringly selected. A proof is their enduring power over the child's mind. Young people are gluttons for details and have an acute sense of what is fit and proper in that respect. They know that Robinson Crusoe found just the right number and kind of things at the wreck to satisfy the imagination, while they remember that that fearsome household, the Swiss Family Robinson, found so much that every scrap of interest goes out of the tale. And for generations youth has accepted the folk tale as never blundering in this vital matter.

Again, both the folk tale and the Victorian novel have the merit of being unselfconscious. The great Victorians did not lay bare their souls, apart from the souls of their characters. They were not

concerned to preach a new metaphysic or a new morality. What they had to give in that respect must be implied. Their view of the universe is to be deduced from the drama unfolded; it is never given in set terms. Thackeray, indeed, has sometimes the air of a coy and sentimental showman, as in the last paragraphs of *Vanity Fair*; but this is a mere trick of his. His real views on the problems of life must be looked for in the fortunes of Becky Sharp and Dobbin and Pendennis and Colonel Newcome, and not in any irrelevant interpolations. The Victorian novelist at his best was as objective as Shakespeare, and as the anonymous folk tale.

VII

I come lastly to the greatest of the links between the two—the fact that they have a dominant purpose and the same purpose. The Victorian novels and the folk tales are not mere transcripts of life—they are interpretations of life, and they are interpretations of life in a hopeful spirit. In the folk tale the plain man comforted himself in his difficulties by showing that the weak things of the earth can confound the strong; that nothing is impossible to the courageous and single-hearted; that the unfittest in the worldly sense can survive if he is the fittest in more important respects. They are a glorification of the soul of man, an epic of the resurgence of the divine in human nature. They make the world a happier place because they show it interpenetrated by hope and opportunity.

The great novelists do the same thing by subtler methods. With them it is not the good fairy that solves the problem, but something unconquerable in the human spirit. They make the world more solemn, for they show the darkest places in it. They show the capacities for evil in man's breast, the cruelty and callousness of life, the undeserved suffering of the good, and the undeserved fortune of the evil; they show the transience of human glory and the fragility of human hopes. But if they make life more solemn they also make it brighter. They enlarge our vision, light up dark corners, break down foolish barriers, and make the world more sunlit and more spacious. If they do not preach any single philosophy they, in Shelley's words, 'repeal large codes of fraud and woe'. They revive hope in humanity by revealing its forgotten graces and depths. They are optimists in the largest sense, for without optimism there can be no vitality. Thackeray, indeed, indulges often in a kind of gentle melancholy, but it is not to be taken too seriously. His gusto, his delight in his personages,

gives the lie to his occasional pessimistic meditations, which indeed are only bits of self-humiliation designed to propitiate the gods.

(The optimism of such novels and of the folk tale is a profound thing, for it is based upon a very clear and candid view of life. The folk tale knows only too well the stubborn brutality of things; and, knowing this, it is still prepared to hope. Such optimism is far more merciless than any pessimism. Also it is far closer to reality. A tale which describes any aspect of life and makes of it nothing but a pathological study in meanness and vice is more fantastic than any fairy tale.) You remember Stevenson's fable of the *Lantern-Bearers*, where he pictures a camp of small urchins who carry their smelly tin lanterns buttoned under their overcoats, and reflects what asses such a group, sheltering in the cold sand on a bleak sea-shore on a dark autumn night, must have seemed to the spectator who could not understand their recondite pleasures. And from the picture he draws a profound moral.

'To miss the joy', he says, 'is to miss all. . . . Hence the haunting and truly spectral unreality of realistic books. Hence, when we read the English realists, the incredulous wonder with which we observe the hero's constancy under the submerging tide of dulness, and how he bears up with his jibbing sweetheart, and endures the chatter of idiot girls, and stands by his whole unfeatured wilderness of an existence, instead of seeking relief in drink or foreign travel. Hence in the French, in that meat-market of middle-aged sensuality, the disgusted surprise with which we see the hero drift side-long, and practically quite untempted, into every description of misconduct and dishonour. In each, we miss the personal poetry, the enchanted atmosphere, that rainbow of fancy that clothes what is naked and seems to ennoble what is base; in each, life falls dead like dough, instead of soaring away like a balloon into the colours of the sunset; each is true, each inconceivable; for no man lives in the external truth, among salts and acids, but in the warm, phantasmagoric chamber of his brain, with the painted windows and the storied walls.'

You have the same moral in a verse of Francis Thompson's:

> The Angels keep their ancient places—
> Turn but a stone, you start a wing!
> 'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
> That miss the many splendoured thing.

and in some delightful doggerel lines of Mr. Masefield:

> I have seen flowers come in stony places,
> And kindness done by men with ugly faces,
> And the Gold Cup won by the worst horse at the races,
> So I trust, too.

VIII

The folk tale belongs to no one country or age. Many go back to the ancientry of our race. They are part of the common stock of humanity and are closer to mankind than any written word. They are the delight of our childhood and they are part of our unconscious thought. I have a notion that things so long descended and prepotent are not likely to be forgotten. I have a notion, too, that any form of literature related to them, inspired by the same creed, close to the earth and yet kin to the upper air, will have the same immortality. To-day we are sometimes told that Scott and Thackeray and Dickens, and even Thomas Hardy, are back numbers, that they practised a superseded form of art, that the novel of the future will be a far more recondite thing, tremulous with meaning, profoundly 'aware', surcharged with subtle psychology, and that the old crude business of story and character and moral preference and a cheerful philosophy is only for the amusement of children. I take leave to doubt that forecast. The other day I took up a book of essays on the 'Eighteen-seventies', and I found these words by one of the truest of our living poets—Mr. Walter de la Mare:

'The distant rumour that thrills the air is not only the sound of Time's dark waters, but is mingled with the roar of our own busy printing presses. "As we are, so you shall be!" The very years that we now so actively occupy will soon be packed up in an old satchel, and labelled "The Twenties"; and our little hot, cold, violent, affected, brand-new, exquisite, fresh little habits of mind, manners, hobbies, fashions, ideals, will have thinned and vanished away, will steadily have evaporated, leaving only a frigid deposit of history; a few decaying buildings, a few pictures, some music, some machine-made voices, an immense quantity of print—most of it never to be disturbed again. In the midst of the battle maybe it is indiscreet to muse on the tranquil, moonlit indifference of the night that will follow.'

It is a salutary thing to remind oneself that the judgements of posterity may be different from our own. But it is permissible, I think, to claim endurance for things which have the qualities that hitherto have endured—things that are close to the tap-root of humanity. I believe that so long as youth ascends the beanstalk with Jack, and rides in the glass coach with Cinderella, and sets off with the youngest son to seek his fortunes—that so long all ages will continue to dance with Becky at the Waterloo Ball, and take the heather with Rob Roy, and mount the Rochester diligence with Mr. Pickwick.

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